Responding to disasters like Katrina

Commentary On
Fred Cuny (1944-1995) -- Disaster Relief Innovator

How, with corporate backing, might engineers who ascribe to Fred Cuny's ideas about effective disaster relief in his book, *Disasters and Development*, approach the engineering challenges of Katrina?

This is a good question, but a complex one. In general, I'd say that Fred Cuny's basic approach includes trying to be prepared to act quickly and effectively before a disaster strikes. The problem is that it seems they we are so often taken by surprise. In the case of Katrina, hindsight might have told us that the levees put the area at high risk for bad things if they don't hold. And, it seems to me, there were engineers who had issued warnings about their inadequacy. Still, was anyone in a good position to anticipate the magnitude of the disaster that could result from their failure?

Well, suppose that, realistically, we should always expect that sometime or other, some way or other, we will be taken by surprise in disastrous ways--even with our best efforts to take preventive measures. Once disaster strikes, Cuny would say that engineers will be needed. His book on disaster relief (Oxfam/Oxford) focuses mainly on how best to help after disaster strikes. This, he says, requires one to figure out both how to provide assistance & knowledge of what will really count as (long-term) assistance. This latter knowledge, he says, requires knowing how those who are victims see things, what they will be able to do for themselves once the rescuers leave, and so on. For Cuny, quick fixes are like bandaids--something that may be needed in the short run (to keep the bleeding under control). But Cuny was interested in long-term fixes. An understanding of local needs, abilities, etc. is something that one could try to acquire well before disaster strikes. This is because the understanding that is needed is not just of rescue tactics, but of what a community needs when things are going well (after the rescuers have left).

I can't do justice to what Cuny had in mind in short space (after all, he wrote an entire book on this). But it seems that, ideally, good rescue work after disaster strikes requires leadership that is well informed about the life conditions (past, present, and future) of those who might be victimized by disasters (a disproportionate number of whom, unfortunately, typically are already living in poverty, neglect, or in oppressive circumstances). In any case, more than specialized engineering knowledge is needed & there needs to be a readiness to learn about these other matters of importance (as it is unlikely that even someone as conscientious as Cuny would have all the needed knowledge ready-to-hand). Formal, interdisciplinary education may well have a role to play here.

So, what kind of "corporate backing" might be most useful in light of Cuny's approach? Not money for bandaids only, he might have said. Money for educational programs designed to prepare engineers to do effective disaster relief work as engineers might be a good investment. Cuny and his disaster relief agency should not be the exception (as they have been perceived by many, including themselves, to be); they should be more commonplace in the engineering professions. The corporate challenge, then, could be to encourage and support engineering programs that can be expected to give us more engineers who will be ready and able to respond constructively to disasters like Katrina. At the same time, this sort of program could focus on the need for preventive measures, or at least measures likely to reduce the impact of Katrina-like disasters. I hope these comments are at least a little bit helpful, belated and broad as they are.